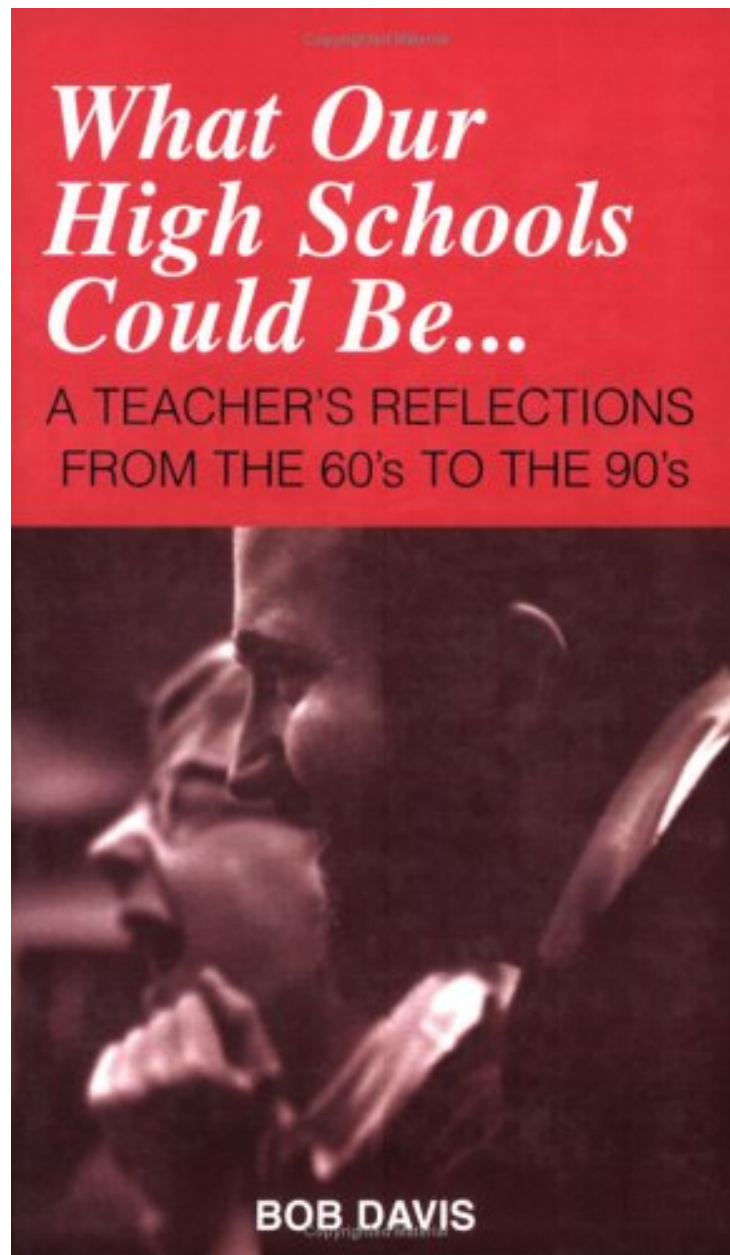


Book Reviews

What Our High Schools Could Be ... A Teacher's Reflections from the 60's to the 90's

by Bob Davis

Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Educational Foundation/Garamond Press,
1990, v + 258 pages



The American critical pedagogist Henry Giroux, in a recent guest lecture at York University, urged teachers to become "transformative intellectuals," making schools an integral part of a struggle towards a radical democratic society. Here in Canada, Bob Davis has been functioning in such a capacity for close to three decades. Since 1964, when he, with some help from his friends, founded *This Magazine Is About Schools* (TMIAS), Davis has been an insistent critical voice, a thorn in the side of the educational establishment, and a utopian visionary who has acted out many of his dreams about what schools could be in the context of his own classroom teaching. *Our Schools/Our Selves* (OS/OS) has recently published a collection of his essays, broadsides, and reminiscences which provide a record of his confrontation with the System.

This 30-year guerilla warfare has taken place both inside and outside the public schools. In the mid-sixties Davis resigned from his position as a high school history teacher in suburban Toronto to help to establish the experimental school Everdale Place in Hillsburgh, Ontario, along the lines of the libertarian teachings of A. S. Neil's Summerhill. At the same time he wrote critically, in the pages of TMIAS, about the factory-like character of the regular schools: the regimentation, the poor student-teacher relationships, the irrelevant curriculum, prefiguring the current analysis of critical pedagogy in this respect.

Ten years later, having grown weary of the hot-house atmosphere of a middle-class rural school community and wanting to try out some of his new ideas in the regular system, Davis was back in a high school classroom in Toronto. By this time the system had loosened up a bit, when it came to the deportment of students, and developed a more liberal rhetoric, but Davis was struck by the tyranny of class behind the new emphasis on "individualized learning." He became a vocal opponent of streaming working class students into classes in which they were essentially warehoused. Choosing to teach students in the lower "general level" programs, he put a lot of energy into developing a curriculum that was relevant to the life experiences of these students and at the same time tough-minded enough to help them to make sense of the values and power relations of the kind of society they lived in.

Besides teaching, Davis also took part in progressive struggles in public education in the seventies and eighties. He was active in the movement for more community control of local schools and he fought for tougher teacher unions, living with the sometimes contradictory pull of these two reform currents. In 1980 he launched another magazine for education activists, the Toronto-based *Mudpie*, keeping it afloat for five years. The most current writing in the book takes issue with the latest orthodoxy in the Ontario school system: the stress on "skills" teaching with its conceit that skills can somehow be divorced from content and that students can be taught to be "critical" without learning anything of substance about the society they live in.

It is easy to describe what Davis has done, but harder to classify his thinking. In a sense, Davis has always written and thought as a postmodernist, developing his own idiosyncratic mix from the different political master narratives: conservative, liberal, radical. I remember many heated arguments with him when we were both editors of TMIAS and he offended my more orthodox New Left sensibilities by spicing his articles with quotes from the Bible, George Grant, and Marshall McLuhan as well as the Holy Trinity of Marx, Mao, and Marcuse.

The sixties insight that the personal is the political runs as a *leitmotiv* through his book. A number of the articles deal with his own evolution both as a teacher and a human being. No educator since Paul Goodman has insisted as much on writing and thinking as a "located subject." We get to know about his roots in an Ottawa Valley farm community. We learn about his growing up in Halifax, the son of an Anglican clergyman, a student of George Grant, a shy and intense young man torn by inner conflicts. Davis writes vividly about this time in his life: of his love of music, his desire to remain with his father in the Anglican Church, his inner rage and confusion, his fumbling attempts towards coming to terms with his sexuality. There are accounts of how he broke away, first to study at Cambridge, England, and later to join the Cultural Revolution of the sixties.

His own pedagogic practice is illuminated by a series of case studies. In one chapter Davis writes about taking 13 Everdale students for two weeks to Milwaukee to observe the trial of anti-war activists who in 1968 burned thousands of selective service files. In another we get a description of a giant all-night bean bake that 40 Toronto Grade 9 general level students take on as part of a unit on the life of 19th century shantymen. In these and other contexts we are shown students learning by witnessing, experiencing, imagining, enacting, as well as by doing their homework. Even more significantly, they are encouraged to relate their learning to who they are, and to debate among themselves and with their teacher(s) about the kind of world they want to build.

The book has at times a ragged, scrapbook quality, and I would have quarrelled with the inclusion of some of the pieces, but on the whole Davis is far too ironic and self-conscious to make his writing either self-indulgent or self-serving. For him even the most personal recollections become a text through which he articulates his own complex way of looking at schools and society. Davis has no patience with the violent abstraction of any political orthodoxy, including the Left, but at the core his vision is, as he puts it, "socialism and personal/communal/ecological harmony." This leads him to always consider the democratization of schools in a context of a wider struggle against economic and social inequalities.

A great deal of the anger in this book is directed against the bleak liberal vision of schools. He argues that under the current phase of liberal hegemony the dominant value assumptions in public schools have become more buried than ever, and therefore it is harder for students to get

hold of them and develop a resistance. In the present rewriting of curriculum as an array of technical skills: "reading skills," "math skills," "history skills," "media literacy skills;" and so on, this mystification deepens. Schools become even more alienating places, devoid of any human purposes, when they preach that there is no content or substance worthy of being passed on from one generation to the next. Schools thus offer themselves, cynically, as simply competitive labelling systems which students should take advantage of for a well-paying job. There is nothing worth learning here or anywhere else, they imply. No wonder the dropout rates are high, particularly for those students who already have been labelled as failures by being placed in the lower streams. This kind of schooling makes even the "best and the brightest" numb and cynical. And as relentless competition is offered as the only road to pleasure, excellence, and community, it casts out permanently those who fare less well in such races.

The most original and perhaps also the most controversial aspect of Davis's thinking has to do with his re-evaluation of some aspects of the conservative tradition as a source of strength for the democratic Left. Here he sees eye-to-eye with his former teacher and mentor, the late George Grant. They both emphasize the conservative sense of limits, opposing it to the liberal notion that both human and non-human nature are infinitely malleable. The Left, with its almost pathological fear of "essentialism" and "totalizing narratives" seems not to have noticed that the existing order is now very comfortable with the kind of cultural relativism that has become radical chic. What about the now almost forgotten conservative and visionary roots of the socialist tradition? Is it really possible to build a democratic society without such "timeless" aspirations as respect for human community, for small networks of mutual aid, for love of the earth, and for the belief that humankind has a destiny it must follow? Davis asks. Wanting to strike a balance between the timely and the timeless is also an important part of his pedagogy. Davis writes:

There are still some "eternal verities": the timeless demand for food, clothing, shelter, love, calculation, composure, art, companionship and sex; the greed of the powerful and the sorrow and the anger of the poor and the powerless; the mysterious power of nature, and the pain of separation, disease and death. These constantly rear their heads for humankind. Part of our teachers' job is to reveal them and help find ways to live through them. (p. 242)

Davis has been writing and lecturing about his own vision of a transformative education to teachers, students, parents, community activists, trade unionists, as well as academics in a clear, pungent, and accessible prose for several decades now. As a radical intellectual able to address diverse audiences he may now be part of a vanishing breed. Russell Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals* (1989) complained that social critics are now holed up in the universities and have developed such specialized vocabularies that they are only able to talk to each other, leaving a dangerous vacuum in the public sphere. I have argued elsewhere (Repo, 1990) that Jacoby is

unnecessarily alarmist. I must admit, though, that he has a point when it comes to more recent developments in critical education theory. There is a joke making its rounds among graduate students of education which goes like this: "What do you get when you cross a critical pedagogue with a mafioso? An offer you can't understand." While critical pedagogy has been successful in developing a dialogue with the latest developments in poststructuralist thought, it still has a long way to go before it can say anything comprehensible to the radical school teachers who are supposed to act as foot soldiers in the battle to democratize the schools.

Three cheers to Bob Davis for keeping up the sixties tradition of telling it as it is, and to *Our Schools/Our Selves* for publishing this remarkable and wise document.

Reviewed by
Satu Repo
York University

REFERENCES

Jacoby, R. (1989). *The last intellectuals*. New York: Noonday Press.

Repo, S. (1990). Have the new left intellectuals sold out? [Review of *The Last Intellectuals*]. *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 2(2), 144-150.

Another View Of ***What Our High Schools Could Be...***

The most striking characteristics of Bob Davis's uniquely valuable work (see page 76 of this issue of *Interchange* for publication details) are its good faith, its social awareness, and the depth of experience with schooling on which it is based. Davis is a veteran of the Canadian alternative-school movement that flourished in the 1960s. With George Martell, who shared in the editing and in the dedication of this book, he helped found *This Magazine is About Schools*, as it once was, and Evexdale Place, a pioneering and excellent boarding school. Davis played a major role in the development of Warrendale (later Browndale), a boarding school primarily for wayward and troubled young people.

Warrendale became the subject of a celebrated National Film Board documentary that led to controversy both – as might be expected – from conservative critics and – more surprisingly – from inveterate ephebophiles like myself who thought it looked like a boot camp. As the alternative-school movement languished in the oppressive social climate of the '70s, Davis held firmly to his principles as a teacher – in particular, a teacher of working-class students usually considered to be hardly worth the trouble. In *What Our High Schools Could Be...* Davis tells precisely how he does it.

This book is truly unique. The closest thing to it is the work of the late James Herndon: *The Way It Spozed to Be, How to Survive in Your Native Land, Notes from a School Teacher*. Both men write from the vantage point of the practising, practical classroom teacher. Davis shares Herndon's immediacy, his canny commitment to functioning effectively in the schools as they exist, his "school-wise" stance. But Herndon never developed Davis's systematic theoretical acuity; he would never have written anything like Davis's first chapter, placing the function and dysfunction of schooling squarely in a socialist context. And Davis lacks Herndon's fine, all-pervasive irony, his perception that the essential ability required for surviving in your native land is probably a degree of cheerful coprophagy. They had different native lands, but not that different.

Davis is simultaneously a radical social critic and a shrewd exploiter of the educational possibilities that society, however reluctantly, provides. He is critical of liberalism – as who is not these days – but on more convincing grounds than most. The educational consequences of liberal policy, he maintains, are to deny working and lower class students respect, validation, and the chance to learn and demonstrate what they can do, by vitiating the curricula available to them and neither demanding nor recognizing achievement from them: affording them merely, in Martell's phrase, the chance to get nowhere at their own pace.

Like Herndon, Davis describes in detail approaches that have effectively engaged students previously stultified by the mutual distrust and animosity between themselves and the school: never gimmicks, but ways of selecting and organizing content that means something to the students in the light of their own experience. This is essentially what John Dewey recommended a century ago; but when Davis and his students learn by doing, they often do things that would have terrified most Progressive – or unprogressive – Educators. Davis and his students go to Milwaukee to attend the trial of the Milwaukee 14 War Resisters, stopping off on the way to join a protest demonstration against the Chicago police. They spend all night and half the next day cooking up a beanfest to which all the parents and the school are invited, and come. They discuss and write about sexuality in class as if it were related to passion and honour, neglecting the naming of parts. Their general level history course features a unit on "Work" that begins by listing the jobs the students regard as most dangerous, most boring, most unhealthy, most exhausting, and most stressful, and studying how they got to be that way.

Davis has been very, though sporadically, successful in applying these principles because he is less naive than most Progressive Educators about how society works. He is a genuine, local revolutionary who recognizes that the schools function as one of the mass media; the curriculum is society's cover story and the schools will fight any effort to penetrate it and free students to understand their lives. The process John McMurtry (1990) elucidates so brilliantly, in an earlier issue of *Interchange*, is exactly what Davis must continually combat.

The plethora of recent books and television programs about education avoid questioning the assumptions underlying schooling or the social context in which it is imbedded; and most accept as self-evident the proposition that the most serious ratification of our schools is their failure to train a workforce skilled and motivated to ensure the nation's effectiveness in economic competition. Davis would reject the values underlying this argument, while accepting its importance. He believes that by demanding the schools replace their— at best— patronizing and ultimately demeaning efforts to meet the needs of their under-rated underclass pupils with courteous and firm insistence and assistance, these pupils could achieve goals as important and a life as good as Canada can afford.

Of course they could. Some teachers and administrators in some schools – Davis prominent among them – make real efforts and take serious risks in order to do just this. The problem, as Davis makes clear enough, is that the power brokers of society don't want them to. They're preparing to replace the incorrigible little bastards with Mexicans anyway. It's cheaper. Meanwhile, liberals offend Davis further by being nice to the kids instead of teaching them with the forthright authority to which the working class is more accustomed.

This part I don't buy. Davis admits, wryly, that schools are at least nicer than they used to be. Yes, Stephen Sondheim's Little Red Riding Hood is right: nice is different from good -- very different indeed; and being nice to your social inferiors can be a most effective putdown. But it can also be a genuine expression of who you are and the way you feel about them; and they may just have to get used to it. Most schools aren't really that nice anyway.

In his moving final chapter, Davis notes that effective action will require

traditional political organizing, sophisticated curriculum analysis, political parties, teacher support, special interest groups, crude public battles, courage, daring, grass-roots sacrifice and patience.

Isn't this rather heavy language for a culture dominated by *Three's Company* and the *Cosby Show*? I suppose it is. Especially if you think schools are more or less equal. More or less OK.

Unfortunately, they are not, and when we are engaged in changing them, we must often lose some of our buddies from education's "cultural mode." They must find this political fighting too crude. But it cannot be otherwise.

Both modes are needed, and there's a time for each. (p. 242)

Happily the time for political fighting may now be regarded as past; the battle has been won. As evidence that equality of opportunity now prevails in America, the "Cosby Show" has been surpassed by the Colin Powell Show, than which, surely, *ne plus ultra*. In Ontario itself, the NDP,

like the Queen, now reigns but does not, so far, govern. The threatening cloud has passed away and brightly shines the dawning day.

But even for those of us who, like Bob Davis, still feel victory to be inconclusive, it may yet be difficult to match his zeal and determination. You would need to have not only the courage – no small requirement – but also the affection and respect for all manner of colleagues and adversaries that shine through his work. Davis really burnishes the *ecu* in ecumenical.

His book is authenticated as well as enlivened by its candid and cheerful reliance on explicit personal experience. "As you know by now," Davis observes towards the end of *What Our High Schools Could Be* "I believe in letting my personal and political commitments hang out for my students as much as is prudent" (p. 226). He does as much for his readers, to our great profit, always without dogmatism. "I don't imply," he states (p. 219) "that a good teacher has to have started an experimental school, taught disturbed children, have gay tendencies, made out on busses, or failed to have sex standing up with a London prostitute. Some of the quietest, most conservative people are the best teachers." Still, all this helps; it enriches experience in ways no longer easy to come by" there has been a decline in both experimental schools and London Public Transport.

The gay tendencies to which Davis refers seem, in my biased view, to deserve more honourable mention than this. They make it much harder for society to deceive you by its benevolent mask; or to convince you by its pejorative labels. They must, I should think, be credited as an important source of Davis's courage, insight, and emotional perspicacity. He makes it clear, however, that he – like Maynard Keynes before him, who in later life happily married a ballerina – has transcended these tendencies and flourishes as a heterosexual. Keynes, though, always remained a liberal.

Reviewed by
Edgar Z. Friedenberg
Dalhousie University

REFERENCE

McMuruty, J. (1990). Mass media: An analysis of their system of fallacy. *Interchange*, 21(4), 49-66.

Source: *Interchange*, Vol. 22/3, 1991, 76-82